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Simmons says more spies could have stopped 9/11

By Katie Haughey
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Could the Sept. 11 attacks have been prevented?

Absolutely, says U.S. Congressman Rob Simmons (R-2nd).

"I have no doubt about it now," Simmons, a former CIA operative, said Friday during an interview at The Westerly Sun.

After a series of intelligence hearings, Simmons said he has concluded that the attacks could have been prevented if — and only if — the United States had had more spies in the field at the time.

Simmons said the number of "human intelligence collectors" — spies — at the CIA has been so decimated, the country's ability to acquire and process information has been severely harmed. Therefore, he said, it is crucial now that the number of spies is increased.

"A reform of our intelligence community is timely," Simmons said, adding that since the 1990s, the corps of spies in the CIA has been reduced by as much as 30 percent. A reliance on technological means of collecting information has undermined the CIA's ability to be effective, said Simmons, a sec-

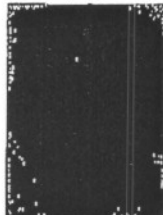
ond-term congressman and Vietnam veteran who spent 10 years in the intelligence field.

A staunch defender of the USA PATRIOT Act, Simmons said Americans are understandably suspicious of the legislation that is based, to some degree, on secrecy. Some citizens are treating the act, passed soon after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, as a "brand new license" to pry into the lives of Americans, when in fact it boils down to judges issuing search warrants for any suspect activity, he said.

"Why would we waste time [investigating] anything less than significant [activity]?" Simmons asked. "People are getting hysterical over a problem that doesn't exist."

Many components of the act are set to expire, a move Simmons said he favors. By setting an end date for some of the policies, the creators of the act provided the chance to review provisions that might need refining.

"We have to be mindful of some aspects that may be an



Simmons

encroachment on civil liberties," Simmons said, without actually citing any particular parts of the law as troublesome.

Simmons said convincing Americans the PATRIOT Act has been successful is difficult because of the top-secret nature of many outcomes. For instance, when the terror alert is raised and airline flights are canceled and nothing happens, citizens may think it was a false alarm. But the intelligence information could have prevented disaster.

"I'm not convinced issuing the terror alerts is a good thing, but time will tell," Simmons said.

To make the CIA effective again requires a steady rebuilding of its case officers over time, but "we have the bones of a clandestine service in place," Simmons said.

The Homeland Security Department has been effective in keeping tabs on the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Simmons said. Better screening of visa applicants and people in violation of their visas is in place, but the Homeland Security Department needs to be closely monitored.

"We have to be careful to make sure this department doesn't become a black hole for taxpayers," he said.